

## **Sermon for 21<sup>st</sup> July 2024 – Year B – Proper 11**

**Preached at St John's Baillieston**

**Mark 6:30-34, 53-56**

### **Sermon**

In 1991, communist rule in Albania came to an end. Until then, Albania had called itself an atheist state, and all practice of religion had been banned. The following year, in 1992, a small group of naïve young evangelical Christians from Durham University arrived in the country to preach the Gospel and maybe to start a church community. That group included twenty-one-year-old me.

We stayed in a small northern town called Laç for several weeks, mostly going door to door with hired Albanian translators, to tell people about Jesus, which was, frankly, terrifying – but there was one particular incident that forever sticks in my mind. We'd gained permission to put on a theatrical presentation in the town square about the message of Jesus. It was mostly music and mime because of the language difficulties, but I think pretty much everyone came out to watch because, to be honest, at that point we were the only show in town.

At the end of our presentation, the crowd began to surge forward – whether for good or for ill we weren't sure – and most of our team retreated quickly inside the town hall. It was hard to judge the mood. Were they angry at us, or just wanting to meet us?

I stayed out on the plaza slightly too long, trying to rescue some of our music and audio gear, and as I hurriedly tried to dismantle a microphone stand, I was surrounded by a sea of faces all looking at me expectantly. Moments later the sea parted, and I saw that several people were carrying a young woman from a

wheelchair towards me. It was clear that they expected me to pray for her, and given the claims our group had made for faith in Jesus, it was also clear that they expected her to be healed. I'm afraid to say my first thought was 'O God, am I going to be lynched?'

This is the memory that comes into my mind every time I hear a bible passage like our gospel today, that describes the crowds pressing in on Jesus, desperately hoping for healing.

I wonder if you can imagine how the disciples felt. They have just been out on a mission, visiting the villages of Galilee in pairs, knocking on doors and staying with those who welcomed them, much as we did in Albania. They trusted God to provide, and everything seemed to go very well. They returned to Jesus with excitement for the debrief, after which Jesus took them away by boat to a deserted place for rest and recuperation – a brief respite from all the needy people. Unfortunately, the people saw them going, and took the land route, so that there was a huge crowd already waiting for Jesus and the disciples at the other side.

Our gospel reading omits the verses that describe what happens next, but this is the point in the story where the disciples beg Jesus to send everyone away to get their own food, but Jesus says, "you give them something to eat!" before responding with the miracle of the feeding of the five thousand, which we'll hear more about next week.

Whenever I ponder bible passages, the first questions I like to ask are "What does this tell us about God's character, about who God is? And what does it tell us about who God is inviting us to be?" And the first thing I notice here is that Jesus immediately gets stuck in, caring for the people in front of him. He was intending to have some very important downtime, but here they are, and they need him, so he serves them, offering them himself.

So, since we believe that Jesus is God made human, we see that God is not a god who stands aloof from us, demanding faith and belief from afar, frowning with disapproval at our many failings. Jesus shows us instead that God has compassion for us, that he stands with us, that he responds with love to anyone who seeks him out. And, of course, he encourages his followers and disciples – who now know what it’s like to be loved unconditionally – to do the same.

But we also see that God knows that human beings cannot do without times of rest, times to be at peace, to attend to our own wellbeing. Even though Jesus’ plan to head for a deserted place was thwarted by the crowd, he and his disciples did at least have a brief time – probably several hours - alone on the boat.

What’s tricky I think is trying to find a balance between serving others and caring for oneself. Once Jesus began his public ministry, there was never really a point when no one was seeking him out with some kind of need. He often had to sneak off by himself at night if he wanted to pray. And yet he never seems to have turned anyone away. He walked around, made himself available, and responded with love to anyone who approached. And then, when he needed to, he left and made time to recuperate, without any sense of guilt. It is a good model, I think, for all of us as followers of the Jesus Way.

There is, however, another group represented in this gospel reading whose perspective I haven’t yet considered. I’ve talked about Jesus and the disciples, and how God’s love encourages us to serve others while making space for ourselves. But there’s this whole other group in the story who are running ahead of Jesus to try to intercept him. They’re desperate to reach out to him, to make contact, to be fed, to be healed. They’re bringing the sick out on mats, shouting to each other about where Jesus was last seen, frantically rushing about the whole region trying to find him. They humiliate themselves, begging Jesus to notice them, crawling on hands and knees to touch the hem of his cloak.

They don't put a face on and pretend they've got it all together. They make themselves deeply vulnerable. They hold up their wounds to Jesus in full view of everyone, and God in Jesus responds to that vulnerability. Perhaps this is where we see ourselves – in the crowd, rather than with the disciples? Perhaps the Church is like the hem of Jesus's cloak, and we are here desperate for God to touch and heal us.

Well, of course, the disciples are needy too. They're just the same as everyone else. Like this priest, they are trying to look like they know what they're doing. But underneath, they're also vulnerable and anxious and afraid, and they won't admit to themselves just how much until Jesus is on the Cross and they've all fled, denied Jesus and gone into hiding. They've spent all this time learning from Jesus, but it's only after they're confronted with their own desperate need that they finally understand what Jesus has been doing.

Back in Albania – because I know you want to know how that story ends - I was suddenly surrounded by a crowd of people who were desperate to encounter God's love and healing, after decades of being told God didn't exist. So, they didn't care about propriety or being polite. They pushed forward and they carried their sister to me. Perhaps they thought I had a hotline to God. Perhaps they thought I knew what I was doing. Up till that point I also thought I knew what I was doing. But I'd not been honest with myself. I was hiding my vulnerability from God, and from everyone else. So, I reached out my hand, mumbled a quick prayer over the girl, turned, and fled without looking back at the crowd. I have no idea what happened afterwards. I ran from their need, but God has not run from mine, and he will certainly not run from yours.